



Success Story: Composting is Big Business for Upstate Worm Farms

In Brenda Lotito's business, the "green" movement has become her golden opportunity. Brenda founded Upstate Worm Farms (UWF, Inc.) in Syracuse over seven years ago. UWF, Inc. has created a profitable business out of 'vermicomposting' - tiny red worms that break down organic material such as vegetable scraps into nutrient rich compost, with one pound of worms eating a half-pound of waste a day. The process yields compost that offers an easy, clean and inexpensive alternative to traditional chemically-based fertilizers for families and businesses such as organic farms, golf courses, and hydroponic growers.

The business idea originated from her three-year-old son's fascination with their backyard worms, but it didn't formalize until Brenda attended a Women Igniting the Spirit of Entrepreneurship (WISE) Conference for aspiring women entrepreneurs in Syracuse.

"I didn't realize it was a business opportunity at first. I talked with another WISE Conference attendee about what type of business to start. As I asked her what she was passionate about and what she talked about the most, I had that light bulb moment when I knew this was what I was going to do," explains Brenda.

After attending the WISE Conference, Brenda contacted the Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at Onondaga Community College to meet with a business advisor. Senior Business Advisor Joan Powers assisted Brenda in researching the worm composting industry through SBDC's access to the SUNY Research Network. The data was incorporated into the original business plan Brenda used to guide her business in the early stages of growth.

Brenda started out by creating a specially designed box that could hold one pound of red worms and began selling them to garden club members around Syracuse. When her customers wanted more information about composting with worms, Brenda wrote a book on vermicomposting, "The Dirt on Worm Farming." Authoring a book helped establish Brenda as an expert in the field and expand her potential customer base.

"When someone tells you they will pay \$25.00 for a pound of worms or \$10.00 for your book on worm composting, those are the many little breaks that helped keep me going in the beginning," said Brenda.

Marketing a new business can be a daunting challenge for anyone. Brenda's experience was no different: "You have to talk to a lot of people to find your customers. The only way to find a direction for your business is the 'go for the no'," she explained. For Brenda, rejecting rejections helped her find the customers she was looking for. The transition from a woman who loved talking about composting with worms to president of a small business was a gradual one, and very important. Brenda comments, "At first no one wanted to take my business seriously. Introducing myself as a president of UWF, Inc. and believing in the value of my business really helped make the difference."

UWF, Inc. has grown from its original location in Brenda's home to an 800 square-foot facility in East Syracuse. The company still sells the original worm composting boxes and books, but has added new capabilities. UWF, Inc. can now vermicompost on a much larger scale onsite. With the addition of a thermophilic machine, the food scraps are heated to 145 degrees Fahrenheit to kill all bacteria. The bacteria-free scraps are then given to the worms over several days to compost. Brenda's business idea has come full circle, as this year UWF, Inc. composted the food waste onsite at the annual WISE Conference in Syracuse, which had over 700 attendees and approximately 300 pounds of food waste.

UWF, Inc. now has a custom-built, 500 pound worm box at their facility and will accept contracts for large scale vermicomposting beginning this September. Brenda is very happy to have completed the NYS Woman Owned Business certification process in July: "I'm hoping it will give me the opportunity to work with state and local entities."

Brenda now speaks at international recycling and composting conferences about the accomplishments of Upstate Worms Farms, including Science Teachers Association of NYS, Federation of New York Solid Waste Association, and US Composting Council Conference attendees. Her passion for vermicomposting is evident in the numerous presentations made to Syracuse-area schools as part of the Go Green Initiative. School teachers use Brenda's worm boxes to teach their students about recycling, composting, and ecosystems in a hands-on way.

"I am excited about my business and the possibilities ahead," said Brenda. "Now that I am corporate, I continue to rely on the SBDC for information, contacts and meeting facilitation. Joan Powers has helped my business in every chapter of its story."